

*For G. S. Singh*  
*24/11/1975*  
*Randhir Singh*

**TERRORISM, STATE TERRORISM  
AND  
DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS**

**RANDHIR SINGH**

**INDIAN ACADEMY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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## TERRORISM, STATE TERRORISM AND DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

Randhir Singh

### I

It is a privilege for me to be addressing this inaugural session of the Seventh State Conference of Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) at Karimnagar, home of the great Telangana Struggle which, regardless of what happened to it afterwards, yet has a message, and the promise of other possibilities, for the people still struggling for a better life in this country, in Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere. I have my memories of those youthful years as a full-time communist activist. It is a privilege also because APCLC is no longer just another civil liberties organisation; today it is a movement, a movement of exceptional significance, representing as it does an outstanding example of effective people's intervention in the life and politics of our country — all the more exceptional and significant for the paucity of its material resources and the heavy odds against which it has to work. Not formally associated with any democratic rights organisation, I have admired your work from a distance, as have many others. And everywhere in this country your courage, commitment and struggle have been a source of inspiration to those actively engaged in defending people's democratic rights or civil liberties. Among them are friends in the People's Union for Democratic Rights at Delhi, who have specifically asked me to convey their fraternal greetings to this Conference.

You have been admired and sought to be emulated but, together with other democratic rights organisations, you have also been criticised and condemned. Even as the Indian State and ruling class politics have been rapidly degenerating into a lawful as well as lawless authoritarianism in recent years, especially repressive when people protest or seek to organise and struggle, thereby making the presence and work of democratic rights organisations all the more necessary and urgent, though more risky also, these organisations have come to be regularly reviled and run down not only by the ruling elite or those manning its state apparatuses but also by others in all sorts of other places, especially the media. The critics claim to be independent and impartial, above party, politics or classes; even more than 'law and order' they speak in the name of 'the nation', 'the unity and integrity of India'. It has become customary for them to refer to democratic rights organisations, with ill-concealed hostility and unease as 'a nuisance', 'do-gooder groups', 'the self-styled do-gooders', 'so-called defenders of civil liberties', 'these worthy organisations', and so on. At

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other times they are portrayed, attacked or dismissed, as 'front-organisations' — for 'anti-national' forces, 'terrorists' or 'secessionists', or, as in case of APCLC, 'the Naxalites', etc.

I am not going to speak of the increasing importance, despite all the odds and all these critics, of your struggle in defence of democratic rights in our essentially undemocratically constituted society which, with its multiple crises, is daily becoming more undemocratic and oppressive for the people. There is more to learn from you here than to teach you. Nor is it for me to make a critical assessment of your work and offer suggestions — you are in every way better placed and equipped to undertake this exercise, and this is indeed what you shall be doing at this conference. As a concerned citizen who believes that the issues of Terrorism, State Terrorism and Democratic Rights involve us all, today more than ever before, even if in apparently different ways, I shall be content to make a few observations on how to think about these issues, in the hope that a little more clarity here may lend a little more effectiveness to our struggle in defence of people's democratic rights. If there is something of the teacher or the academic about my argument, I can only ask you to overlook it as an occupational hazard, for this is how I have mainly functioned over the last forty years and more. Though, I would like to reassure you, it is not going to be an academic or 'scholarly' exercise. I shall try not to be boring and I shall also avoid the jargon, the 'ifs' and 'buts', and the Aesopian or 'now black, now white' manners of expression that sophistication in academic scholarship seems to entail these days. I will try to speak as simply and clearly as possible for I do want to be understood. Mine will be in fact a straightforward political and partisan exercise in the sense that in a class-divided, exploitative society like ours all worthwhile thinking is, inevitably as it were, political and partisan. In such a society, on all important issues, in philosophy as in real life, neutrality is an illusion. Here everything said or done, or left unsaid or undone, helps one side or the other. And so it is with the issues of terrorism and democratic rights. I will readily concede that what I am going to say is nothing new or original. If, nevertheless, I have considered this exercise worthwhile, and chosen to so speak today, I could perhaps, in justification, appeal to Goethe who had asserted: 'One must from time to time repeat what one believes in, proclaim what one agrees with and what one condemns'.

## II

**How does one think?** The question is important, whatever the issue or the area of one's concern, because on this thinking, on the nature and adequacy of the understanding it provides, depends the nature and adequacy, the ultimate effectiveness, of how one acts in the matter. It is our diagnosis of a disease which

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determines its treatment. In the same way, it is our explanation or understanding of social reality, any aspect of it, which indicates the prescription, the necessary purposeful action on our part. An explanation thus always has a 'value-slope', it determines the prescription as well. Bourgeois social science, seeking to become 'truly scientific', has often so debated this issue as to ignore or effectively deny this dependence or determination. It has in fact sought to drive a wedge between explanation and prescription, between 'facts' and 'values', and made much of the dogmas of 'value freedom' or 'ethical neutrality' in social scientific enterprise. Much of this debate has been a wasteful exercise, illustrative only of a certain philosophical illiteracy among the social scientists concerned. This is not the place or occasion to explore the philosophical or methodological issues involved in this debate, issues which are necessarily political also. I have written and spoken of these elsewhere. Here I will make only two points which are immediately relevant to my argument.

■

In the first place it needs to be recognised that the ~~the~~ issue of democratic rights directly impinges upon human interests in our society, one way or the other. Therefore disputation and conflict over them should not be a matter of any surprise. Centuries ago, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes had, with characteristic insight, pointed out that if geometrical axioms were to be 'a thing contrary to the interest of men that have dominion', even these would be 'if not disputed, yet by the burning of all books of geometry, suppressed, as far as he whom it concerned was able'. Hobbes's insight in fact goes deeper to touch on a problem at the very heart of social sciences: truth here is always partisan. Unlike the physical or natural sciences which are fairly neutral politically, the social sciences, concerned as they are with class-divided societies, are full of political dynamite. Truth here is not only partisan but also dangerous for the dominant classes, for it tends to affect their interests adversely. Truth becomes a matter for disputation and, if need be, suppression — and therefore also difficult to acquire. This is perhaps the most important reason — another, closely related to it, is its philosophical or methodological orientation — why so much of social science, far from being concerned with truth, is ~~so much apologetics only, without, even~~ its esoteric sophistication, weird and unintelligible jargon — 'Socspak', Malcolm Cowley called it — and often obscurantist ideological role in society has compelled Stanislaw Andreski to even speak of 'social sciences as sorcery'. Be that as it may, our concern here is with democratic rights of the people. And the point is that they involve human interests, they do adversely affect the interests of those who have dominion in our society. Hence the disputation around them and their attempted suppression

*only*  
for the established order; its practitioners have been well-described by Noam Chomsky as 'a secular priesthood', and



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by the powers that be, suppression of the truth historically embodied in democratic rights. So it has been in the past, and so it is today, in our own troubled times.

My second point is theoretically the more important one. If our explanation always has a 'value-slope', if it is decisive in suggesting the prescription, the purposeful human intervention on our part, then, obviously, it matters how we generally go about explaining or understanding things. In other words, we need to be self-consciously aware of our philosophical or methodological orientation, or, if I may put it that way, aware of the 'philosophy' we have for coming to terms with the reality around us.

This indeed matters. It is this vital issue that the rebel students of Paris raised in the late sixties, when they asked of everyone who would speak to them: 'Where do you speak from?' They had well grasped the fact that every one has a position to speak from, a philosophy so to speak, whether one knows or acknowledges it or not. Because every one needs to have it to be able to live minimally as a human being.

To live postulates coping with the reality of the world around us. To cope or come to terms with this reality, to relate to it in an intelligent, purposive manner, we need to make sense of this reality. And this we do by explaining or understanding it as best as we may. Thus arise our most general ways of seeing and comprehending things, 'our more or less open, more or less clearly or consciously formulated assumptions, opinions, beliefs, principles, attitudes towards life, on which we habitually act, by which we indeed live' — this is our philosophy. Philosophy thus understood is a precondition for any kind of sane existence in the world. It is in this sense that we indeed live by thinking, by ideas, even more than we live by bread. That is why there is none so poor as not to have a philosophy of his own, just as there is none so rich either as to be able to do without one. As A.E. Taylor pointed out long ago, the choice here is not whether one has a philosophy or not but only what kind of philosophy one does or shall have.

'What kind of philosophy' — this immediately draws our attention to an important dimension of the philosophic situation around us. It is a fact that people have generally found the social reality around them rather difficult to cope with for, throughout recorded history and in our own times, it has been an ugly and painful reality, the reality of a class-divided, exploitative and diversely oppressive society. A genuinely human coping would be to seek to change it into a more humane society. But such an effort to change requires, at the very least, a true explanation of things as well as guts to act in a revolutionary manner — a combination rather rare to come by in real life.

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Unable to change it, the people learn to accept this ugly and painful reality — but they can do so only by interpreting it differently, often in a necessarily false manner. Necessarily, because the strain of a true explanation, coupled with the inability to carry out the change it demands is simply too much to bear. In a sense, unable to change the **objective** reality around them, people so change themselves **subjectively** as to be able to accept this reality, with the least strain. Unable to think of themselves as exploited or victimised by an unjust society and yet incapable of doing anything much about it, the people, especially the poor and oppressed, have generally found it more comforting certainly less punishing, to think of themselves as correctly placed by a just society — and here the will of God, law of Karma, vagaries of fate, teachings, of various religions and 'the enshrined wisdom' of assorted moral philosophies, they all help. If the risks involved in the discovery of truth about a class-divided society have persistently pushed social sciences in the direction of **apologetics** and even 'sorcery', the difficulties involved in changing such a society have left their massive mark on social thinking in the form of flourishing social myths, and any number of limited, mistaken or false philosophies. Limited, mistaken or false — such philosophies or ideas have helped the common people everywhere to survive, to live on without going insane. The majority of our own people, the other half of 'the Indian nation', are even today living more by such ideas than by bread — the bread is simply not available most of the time, unlike the ideas which are always there to help interpret and accept its non-availability. It is thus that they come to accept the ugly and painful reality of their poverty and oppression as part of a natural or divinely-ordained arrangement of things. It is one of the many ironies of their life that while the heads of the poor and oppressed are indeed their own, physically, the ideas in their heads belong to others, they correspond not to their own interests, but to the interests of the rich and powerful in society who oppress and exploit them. In this sense, the poor and oppressed are really the philosophers of the rich and powerful, all the time reinforcing latter's domination over themselves.

But this is not the case with only our supposedly ignorant or illiterate common people. So many of us, in our half of society, may be thinking more consciously but we generally do so with 'a false consciousness' in the sense that we are not aware of the real origins of our ideas, the practical political interests they correspond to, or whom they really serve. All too often, even as we too find it comforting to go along with God, <sup>^ fate,</sup> karma, the religious or moral teachings and the rest of it, we live our daily life by the prevalent 'philosophy of commonsense' — 'what can one man do', 'men are selfish by nature', 'the poor have always been with us', 'Indians are all corrupt', 'politics



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is dirty business', 'there is much to be said on both sides', etc., etc. — which helps us evade real issues, difficult choices, all social responsibility, and accept or endorse the established order of things. I might add, the situation in the academy and such other places is hardly any better, only the evasion and the acceptance or endorsement is more subtle and sophisticated. The philosophic underpinning of most of what goes on in our schools and universities only ensures that 'the educated' are duly socialised into the existing social order, that is, come to feel 'at home with exploitation and domination'. Indeed all of us, 'the illiterate' and 'the educated', the academic and the scholar, the intellectual and the journalist, the democratic rights activist and his critic, need to answer the question: 'Where do you speak from?', 'Whose philosopher you really are?'

'Where do you speak from?' is an important question for the democratic rights activists for it points to the need of having a philosophy or methodological orientation which is as rational and scientific as they can possibly make it, in order to ensure greater clarity and effectiveness for their struggle. But the question is important for their critics also, perhaps more so because they are generally far less aware of the issue involved, sharing as they do, despite pretensions, in the currently dominant mode of thinking in our society. And this mode as a rule, Marx had pointed out, is the mode of the dominant classes. These classes, no doubt, always have their 'hired prize fighters'. But the critic may well discover that even when he is subjectively most honest and upright, the position from which he speaks is limited, mistaken, or even false in a manner as to yield prescriptions and politics which correspond to the interests of those who have dominance in our society and that these interests demand a defence and justification of "state's current assault on the democratic rights of the Indian people."

### III

How does the dominant mode of thinking deal with the issues of terrorism, state terrorism and democratic rights? And how do we need to think about them? I shall take a quick critical look at the basic limitation of the dominant mode in its treatment of terrorism and democratic rights; state terrorism is simply an 'unproblem' for it — it stands understood and justified as a corollary of its treatment of the problem of terrorism. State terrorism is something which only needs to be defended. My critical comment shall also be suggestive of a different, more adequate way of thinking about these issues.

The dominant mode is really a commonsense way of thinking, which furnished with academic frills has even come to be raised to the status of 'Method' in social sciences. Its is a loudly proclaimed 'clear-headed' concern with 'here and now', with 'hard facts' and 'things as they are', that refuses to look deeper into

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them or go beyond them -- any such effort would be dismissed as impermissible 'metaphysics'. In one sense such concern is justifiable, indeed necessary, for this is where the search for all scientific understanding begins. It begins, but does not end here. 'Sound commonsense' of the dominant mode, however, stays put with the immediate and the obvious, the apparent or the visible, with facts apart from other facts. The complexity of things, phenomena and processes is itself sought to be reduced, abstracted and isolated into 'facts' and treated as given once for all, outside of their history and their more or less important interconnections. 'The immediately observable, measurable fact' becomes 'that Moloch', as Paul Baran once put it, 'which is always seeking to devour analytic thought in contemporary social science'. It has certainly served to obscure social reality, 'the nature of things' as Marx called it, for things or facts exist, above all, in their history and their interconnections. In fact the more of this history and interconnections one is able to grasp, the more of truth one has.

Let me illustrate with a couple of very simple examples. It is customary with economists and politicians of different hues to regularly refer to the fact of our surplus food stocks as a sign of success, indeed the growing health of our economy and society -- gone are the PL-480 days of food-grain imports. This appears quite obvious and convincing. But seen in relation to only one other fact (I am leaving out the rest) that nearly half our population regularly goes without food, that we are unable to bring our surplus food and our own hungry people together, these stocks would be indicative of something entirely different, they are far more the sign of a failure, indeed a certain shameful sickness of our economy and society. Incidentally, however you define this failure or sickness, it has something to do with, much celebrated 'market-friendliness' of our economy and society. Again, it is customary in our country, with its 'spiritual traditions', to see and speak of 'charity' as a virtue, the mark indeed of a good man and a good society. This too appears obvious enough. But next time you are in the mood to secure salvation for your soul, try giving charity to your best friend -- and the truth will be out. Even a cursory search for its history and interconnections will reveal that charity implies a society which has degenerated into one of gross inequality, of givers and takers of charity. Recognised thus, 'charity' is a kind of sickness in human relations, it is far more the mark of a bad society. In a society of equals there will be no such virtue as charity. Those still retaining their souls -- for souls too are a matter of history and interconnections -- will have to look for other devices 'to arrange for their well-being in the hereafter'!

Engels had something to say about the way of thinking or apprehending the world which I have been discussing. He chose to

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describe it as the 'metaphysical mode of thought'. In that masterpiece of popular exposition of Marxism, *Anti-Duhring*, which despite its critics, all sorts of 'Marxist', 'ex-Marxist' or 'post-Marxist' experts, remains unrivalled in its elucidation of the Marxist way of thinking, Engels noticed that 'at first sight (the metaphysical) mode of thought seems to us extremely plausible because it is the mode of thought of commonsense'. But he found it to be 'one-sided, limited, abstract' because it studies things 'in their isolation, detached from the whole vast interconnection of things; and therefore not in their motion, but in their repose; not in their life, but in their death'. He added: 'in considering individual things it loses sight of their connections; in contemplating their existence it forgets their coming into being and passing away; in looking at them at rest it leaves their motion out of account; ... it cannot see the woods for the trees'.

#### IV

And so it is with metaphysical mode's treatment of the issues of terrorism and democratic rights.

Armed actions, protests, resistance or struggles, in different parts of the country, in Punjab, Kashmir and Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, the North-East, and elsewhere, which have mostly come to be described as 'terrorism', have an extraordinary variety about them. As Indian phenomena, they do share a certain social-material basis and historical context and they have all arisen within an ongoing structure of politics and power-relations, often in response to an utterly unscrupulous and myopic ruling class politics. But they have in each case a specificity of causation and characteristics; each expresses its own kind of grievances against and alienation from the system and the powers that be; each poses a challenge to the Indian state but a different kind of challenge; each seeks a different kind of future for itself, and so on. Armed aspect which they share notwithstanding, they represent social and political developments of great significance, each very distinct from the other.

All this and more is of decisive importance for any proper understanding of the ongoing 'terrorist violence' in India. But in the metaphysical mode of thought all this and more is precisely what comes to be ignored, all distinctions are blurred or obliterated, and everything, all such protests, resistance or struggles are simply lumped together into one omnibus thing called 'terrorism'. The obvious and visible similarities are focussed upon and a certain autonomy which their violent dimension necessarily comes to acquire is inflated into an independent factor, indeed their defining characteristic, as if this violence has no social basis, has nothing at all to do with the economy of the country or its politics, including the

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politics of its ruling classes. Violence is simply abstracted from its varied histories and still more varied interconnections, isolated and reduced to produce an essentially depoliticised composite phenomenon and its equally depoliticised composite image, 'terrorism', complete with bombs, landmines and rocket-launchers, the AK-47s and Kalashnikovs, and 'the dreaded terrorist', an image suggestive of only ruthlessness and inhumanity, delinquency, irrationality and fanaticism, and of course, foreign linkages. 'Terrorism' now is simply a resort to senseless, utterly uncivilised forms of violence, a foreign inspired social or political deviance. It becomes a label of defamation, a means of ostracizing those branded as 'terrorist', excluding them from any human standing. They are the 'outsiders', 'foreign agents', a menace to an otherwise peaceful and orderly society. The image is indeed powerful, evoking fear and hostility, which are then sought to be reinforced with the help of equally abstract, mechanistically posed counter-images of 'non-violence' and 'democratic politics', 'the rule of law' and a fetishised 'Constitution', 'judicial processes' and 'law-abiding ordinary people' and so on, including the almost mythical 'national mainstream', which nobody knows what it is and where it is flowing. Academic scholarship indigenous or foreign-aided, lends its prestige and sophistication to this construct of 'terrorism' as it comes to be nicely aligned with the demand of the establishment for an exclusive focus on violence or the threat of violence. It is this essentially depoliticised image or construct of 'terrorism' and 'the terrorist' which is then promoted by the state through the massive regime of modern propaganda servicing it today — its own electronic devices, with television bringing the image visibly alive right into our homes, and the rest of public and private media, including 'the national press'. A nation-wide 'selling of terrorism' takes place. The selling certainly has its variety and flexibility, but underlying it is the media's ready adoption of the official identification of terrorism and terrorists. As issues of history and socio-political basis are pushed out of consideration, the discourse comes to be confined almost entirely to ways of meeting a self-evident terrorist threat to society. Simultaneously, state terrorism is not seen as another form of 'terrorism', it is rationalised and defended, public sanction secured for it, as a means of countering this threat. Compelled to admit the obviously lawless and terrorist acts of the state, they are justified simply as necessary counter-terrorism. We are even informed that terrorism is a world-wide phenomenon now, just like corruption. But, given the priorities of the ruling classes, while nothing much can or need be done about corruption, terrorism has to be ruthlessly put down. There is no escaping from this responsibility, even if you insist on calling it 'state terrorism'. If the deeper, more specific factors underlying 'terrorism' still come up for consideration, they are either dismissed as no longer relevant or sought to be taken care of by



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that characteristically evasive response: 'of course, but...'. The argumentation turns into a feat of system-supportive word-management, almost an intellectual legerdemain. It is thus that the depoliticised abstraction 'terrorism', well-manipulated by the powers that be, comes to serve the most brutal form of ruling class politics — state terrorism.

#### V

The manipulation is facilitated by the fact that all the 'mainstream' political parties, including those of the established Left, come to subscribe to this depoliticised image. Their continuous contention for power in the state notwithstanding, they have a consensus here — shared by the assorted image and opinion-makers — based upon everybody's commitment to nationalism of one kind or the other. Nationalism as an ideology covers up essential character of Indian social reality, whence 'terrorism' ultimately springs, and helps unite the large social audience behind the ruling class politics in a war against terrorism.

Occasionally there is the appeal to the deviant to give up the bad and violent new ways and rejoin 'the national mainstream' — whatever it is and wherever it flows — as if some morality play is on. But the appeal is neither meant nor taken seriously. In the 'national consensus', the 'terrorist' remains and has to be treated as an 'outsider', an enemy, a threat to the nation, its unity and integrity. There is intermittent talk of 'political solution', 'restoration of the political process', 'political and economic initiatives' and 'packages' of all sorts — the less the ruling classes have to offer the more their emphasis on 'packaging' these days. But this remains so much rhetoric, mere ploys in a deadly political game. Overwhelmed by their own image of 'terrorism', and their ineptitude and opportunism as well, the powers that be are simply incapable of any such initiatives. Perhaps a policy of drift has its own advantages. In any case, a political solution is impossible for them until they recognise 'terrorism' as a genuine political problem — rather a set of political problems, problems with history and interconnections, becoming daily more difficult politically. Despite noises to the contrary, it continues to be seen primarily as a 'law and order' problem. 'Firm action', 'the hard option' persists as the only viable solution, 'a more meaningful alternative' indeed. Counter-terrorism reappears, again and again, as the easier option for the ruling classes. The vested interests that have grown around this option, involving the police and paramilitary forces, bureaucracy, politicians and sundry other dubious elements, only facilitate the persistence of this option — and state terrorism continues. Ever new justifications are found for it, including its currently fashionable rationalisation as a means of creating those ever elusive 'conditions', 'congenial atmosphere' they also



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call it, for a political solution. But there is no solution here, nor any real success. On the contrary, as I wrote four years back, apropos the emerging state terrorism in Punjab: 'its success, such as it may be, will turn out to be even worse in its consequences than its failure'. The politics of state terrorism has only ensured the total alienation of the Sikh people -- not with the Khalistani militants, they are today even less with the Indian state. And, except for some odd pitifully small ultra-left groups, no other politics is in sight. Therein lies the tragedy of Punjab today -- a tragedy for the Sikhs, the Punjabis, including Hindus, and the Indian people as a whole.

State terrorism as a political option has fared no better elsewhere in the country; it has produced only tragedies for the people. Yet the powers that be, in government or in opposition, may criticise or condemn, even 'flay' each other **factionally**, they don't know and can't do anything different or better. Even the best they can offer, but in their ineptitude, and factious lack of will do not, is only a cooption or accommodation within their own brand of 'democratic politics', which is incapable of confronting the really important issues underlying the explosive presence of 'terrorism' in different parts of the country today. They can only seek to hide the utter bankruptcy of their option by still more vigorous nationalist posturing. Not only does the rhetoric around 'the nation' or 'the unity and integrity of India' grow louder, there are new warnings against 'undermining the morale of the police force' or 'tarnishing the image of the army', etc. etc.

#### VI

Bankruptcy of this option apart, it does have its own advantages for the ruling classes. It is not merely a question of its various political formations or groups within them, 'patriots' all, playing their petty political games with 'terrorism' or terrorism-related 'nationalism' in their quest for power in the state. Far more important is the fact that a situation of terror and counter-terror, despite the risks involved, yet serves their more basic class needs. For one thing it facilitates the ongoing ideological manipulation of the people. The bogey of 'secessionism', 'destabilisation', 'threat to unity and integrity of India', etc. is invoked to divert people away from their own concerns and mobilise them behind ruling class politics in the name of defending 'the nation' or maintaining 'national unity'. Their own politics, their struggles for a better life are delegitimised as inopportune in the prevailing, supposedly temporary, situation; even the suspension of democratic rights, for the duration, is demanded. For another, this situation provides the ruling classes with additional pretext and public sanction to further expand and strengthen the repressive state apparatuses and use them to defend their general class interests in the name of fighting terrorism. Thus, for example, we have new laws like Terrorist and Disruptive

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Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA), which in its attack on democratic rights undermines almost every safeguard provided by the Indian Constitution and violates all principles of liberal jurisprudence and natural justice — its definition of terrorist and disruptive activities is wide enough to cover anything and everything that those in authority may choose to find embarrassing, inconvenient or undesirable. And we have more of modernised and better-equipped police and security forces, army's increasingly active role in 'civilian conflict', and state's every-day resort to extra-legal means — all this over and above the normal repressive machinery of the state. This state apparatus, ideologically refurbished and materially augmented, and rationalised as 'a bulwark against terrorism' is now available for use against not just the 'terrorists', but others also, above all the people struggling in defence of their interests and for a more just and equitable social existence.

And it has been so used — against every form of democratic movement, popular struggle or social activism, against trade unions and striking workers, and those seeking to defend the environment, against women and dalits protesting the atrocities committed on them, against the landless and the adivasis engaged in a battle of survival, against journalists and academics, poets and cultural workers, in fact any one deemed inconvenient or undesirable by the state, including of course the civil rights activists. Such has been the experience not only in Punjab, Kashmir and Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, or the North-East, but everywhere else in the country. Not surprisingly, even those who opposed the new legislation and repressive practices when in opposition have found selective recourse to them useful when in power themselves — among the victims have been the opposition members in Congress (I) ruled states and Congress (I) members in the states ruled by the opposition, but, needless to repeat, the common people and those struggling with or for them in all the states. It is thus that state terrorism, spreading within democratic forms and without them, is contributing to the rise of an authoritarian, ever more repressive and anti-people state in India.

Needless to add, when the civil or democratic rights organisations protest and seek to intervene on behalf of the people against the growing terrorism or lawlessness of the state, they are seen as 'a nuisance', dismissed as 'do-gooders', denounced as 'front organisations', and finally, identified with 'terrorism' itself, condemned as 'anti-national'.

## VII

If 'things', abstracted from their concrete socio-historical existence, come to be easily depoliticised, 'their mental images', that is, 'ideas' too may come to be subjected to a

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similar treatment. It is thus that alongside the depoliticisation that 'terrorism' represents, we are witnessing an increasing depoliticisation of the idea of democratic rights into a rapidly spreading version of 'human rights'.

Lewis Namier, whose work gave rise to a whole new school of history-writing, argued for and practised a historiography which pushed ideas out of history. He sought a history voided of ideas and, as a conservative, a politics voided of 'political philosophy', or 'programmes and ideals' — he hailed such politics as a token of 'greater national maturity'. In a parallel development in philosophy, scholars have sought to push history, as well as politics, out of ideas. Philosophy properly understood and practised is analysis, which easily becomes a timeless elucidation of ideas or concepts. Ideas are divorced from things they represent, concepts from the reality they are the concepts of. Ideas and concepts extrapolated from their concrete existence, their historical context or socio-economic inter-connections, are transformed into weightless counters which are then manipulated at will, by themselves or in arbitrary conflation with other such idea-counters, generally in the service of conservative, often admittedly anti-radical politics. In political philosophy proper this is well exemplified in the work of Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper or Michael Oakeshott in their treatment of the ideas of concepts of 'liberty' — 'negative' and 'positive', 'historicism' and 'open' or 'closed' society, or 'rationalism' and 'tradition', respectively. Such treatment, especially as analysis, has indeed served as an antidote to sloppiness in our thought and expression, it has helped light up many dark corners, resolved ambiguities of language and argument, and generally made for greater precision and clarity in our thinking. But if 'one-sided, limited, abstract' concern with facts, as they appear to be, has been a Moloch 'seeking to devour analytic thought in contemporary social science', such philosophical exercises, in their flight from the real world, the world of facts as they really are, have tended to denude social thinking of its substantive empirical content and ethical concerns. In any case, an atemporal, dehistoricised treatment of an idea or a concept easily makes for its 'depoliticisation'. And it is in this manner that the concept of democratic rights or civil liberties is undergoing a certain depoliticisation these days. As history and politics are pushed out of it, what is emerging is a particular, abstracted and almost bloodless, use of the term 'human rights'. This has been a much used term for a long time, essentially expressive of same or similar concerns as democratic rights or civil liberties and for certain purposes its use is indeed most appropriate. But it always had a certain history-and-context-lessness about it, referring as it does to that rather abstract category 'human being'. Ever amenable to easy de-historicisation, it is a dehistoricised and therefore depoliticised use of 'human rights' which has come into

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circulation with remarkable speed and strength in recent years, its trajectory rather closely related to that of the other abstraction, 'terrorism', produced by the metaphysical mode of thinking. As with 'terrorism' in one way, now with 'human rights' in another, economic-structural basis of democratic rights, the concrete historical, political and cultural context of their existence as well as the state's attack on them is obscured. Conflicts in society and the processes generating them which are always historically specific and the equally specific contradictions between the people and the state which make democratic rights an important issue in real life, come to be pushed out of consideration. The rough and troublesome specificities of situation and struggle, conflict and confrontation smoothed out, an universalised abstraction, 'human rights' takes over, leaving every one free to make moral demands, pass ethical judgements, or play politics in its name. These 'human rights' won't hurt anyone, least of all those who deny or violate the democratic rights of the people. The violation of democratic rights can in fact go hand in hand with a defence of 'human rights'. The worst violators of the one the world over can parade themselves as the best defenders of the other. A Reagan or a Bush is the man for our times. Sanitised from the grim reality of life, from the economy and politics of our essentially undemocratic times, 'human rights' becomes an eminently fit subject for discourse, and a little later, almost inevitably, for discourse over changing terms of discourse!

It is thus that 'human rights' as a subject for study is arriving on the academic scene the world over, characteristically devoid of much concern for the people or involvement with democratic rights movement: departments and courses at universities, long or short-range research projects at centres, old and new, foreign sponsorship and funding, especially by the American agencies well-known for their role in such matters in Latin-America and elsewhere in the third world, 'human rights' seminars and conference, national and international, all the time somewhere or the other, which governments violating democratic rights, yet in search of legitimacy, are not afraid to sponsor, fund or join in.... A new breed of human rights academics is on the way, just like the far too many we already have in areas become fashionable from time to time, opening up new, exciting possibilities for a career and for peer-group scholarship. The mundane interests of these academics apart, 'the empiricist method', 'specialisation' and 'functional rationality' rampant in the academy will easily accommodate and sustain this 'new discipline' as they would describe it.

• The comment by **Economic and Political Weekly**, made a few months back remains relevant:

"Like tribal art and ethnic handicrafts, human rights appear to have become chic among members of the



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establishment. Delhi is hosting a World Human Rights Congress in December. The external affairs ministry is partly financing it and has put a senior joint secretary to officially represent it on the preparatory committee of the Congress which is going to be held in the five-star Maurya Sheraton hotel in the capital.

The capital's elite university, Jawaharlal Nehru University, has even started a Human Rights Teaching and Research Programme. The director of this programme is in charge of organising the World Human Rights Congress. Curiously enough, this gentleman has never been known to have taken up any human rights issue, or sign his name to any petition or appeal protesting violation of civil liberties within India. Academic discourse on human rights at international fora is apparently not only a safer option, but also probably a convenient stepping stone to recognition in right circles.

Nothing can be more hypocritical than the government's patronage of the World Congress. New Delhi is yet to ratify the Optional Protocol to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention against Torture. By refusing to ratify the Optional Protocol the government is denying private civil liberties groups in India the right to approach the UN Human Rights Committee with cases of violation of human rights of Indian citizens, and disallowing the UN committee to investigate into such cases. The government is violating almost every day the major provisions of the International Convention which prohibits detention without trial, trial in camera, killing of citizens, torture in police custody, etc. One wonders how the official representatives of the government at the World Human Rights Congress will defend themselves if asked about the detention of thousands of people under NSA and TADA in Kashmir, Punjab, and other parts of the country, or about custodial deaths, or about indiscriminate police firings upon peasants and workers fighting for their democratic rights. But will there be anyone in the Congress to ask such questions? Will the guests dare to offend the hosts?

Under the existing laws, victims of police torture or next of kin of those killed in police custody, have no statutory right to compensation. Yet, the government is spending several lakhs on preparations for this jamboree on 'human rights'..."

Incidentally, the government of India still refuses to allow



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Amnesty International and similar other civil liberties organisations to visit several parts of the country where state's violation of democratic rights has become a routine affair.

### **VII**

It is the dominance of 'the metaphysical mode of thought' even with those on the Left who otherwise profess the Marxist, that is, the dialectical mode, which has over the years helped the ruling classes to define and preempt the terrain of Indian politics for their own purposes. They have posed the issues in this mode, asked the questions accordingly, and secured the answers they wanted to have. For example, this is how it has been in the recent crisis-ridden years: 'Are you for the Sikh/Kashmiri/Ulfa militants or the nation? for secessionism or the unity and integrity of India? for violence or democratic politics? for Congress(I) government or that of the National Front? for Communalism or secularism? for reservations or against them?' and so on. It is not difficult to see that in each case the choices are really foreclosed in the sense that whatever the answer, it lines you up behind one or the other kind of ruling class politics. The way the issues are posed consistently ignores the larger context and the deeper determinant interconnections, dissociates the issues from any consideration of socio-economic structures, class domination, or ruling class politics, and thus ensures that radical or revolutionary choices simply do not come up as answers, as real historical possibilities.

It is the same with the metaphysical mode's posing of the issues of terrorism, state terrorism and democratic rights. A certain sectarianism apart, it is the philosophical surrender here and the consequent surrender to bourgeois politics which has prevented the established Left as a whole from coming out actively in defence of democratic rights today, as their forbears, the united communist movement once did. During the British rule, defence of democratic rights was a major concern with the CPI, it was seen as a part of Indian people's struggle for freedom and a better life.

### **VIII**

Democratic rights have to be defended above all against their violation by the Indian state today. But for an affective defence these violations must not be seen, as the liberals, generally do, as the result of some mistaken policies, unfortunate 'aberrations' or 'distortions', on the part of the Indian state. A Nehruvian vision of the post-colonial state has contributed much to cloud matters here. Nor is it enough to recognise this state, as activists, even 'theoreticians' of the civil liberties movement often do, only as a system of power,

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overgrown and much too-centralised and standing over and above the civil society, and therefore insensitive to the interests of citizens and intolerant of diversity, ever prone to abuse its power, to dominate and repress, to homogenise. Such a view of the state has gained new endorsement these days because it is central to the argument of the most significant development in our social and political life, which has gone on to become an important, though somewhat problematic feature of contemporary social scientific concerns as well as social activism, namely, 'identitarianism', as I would like to describe it. I am not concerned with this development here except to point out that drawing our attention to the multiform oppressions prevalent in our society, as against the conventional focus on the economic oppression, it sees an over-centralised and powerful state, 'the at once homogenising and colonising juggernaut', as the enemy against which the rights and interests of our long oppressed and more disadvantaged social groups, 'identities' as they have come to be called — minor nationalities or ethnic groups, religious minorities, dalits, tribals, women, and so on — have to be fought for, won and defended. In this perspective, even when they have crossed the traditional liberal threshold, studies have focussed on state's obviously visible, politically repressive features but rarely gone deep enough to see its economic basis or class character. That remains a forbidden threshold — to be nodded at or flirted with occasionally, but never to be crossed. State is studied as such but not as the organiser of society in the interests of the class (exploitative) structure as a whole, a function which decisively conditions its own structure and organisation. State is seen in dissociation from this class structure, whose defence, of course with necessary modifications, is its defining characteristic. It is not seen that the Indian state does not merely happen to be violent or repressive, it is inherently so, by virtue of the society it presides over; it guards and keeps going, violently if necessary, an inherently violent society because it is a society of myriad economic, social and cultural oppressions. As a result, when it occurs, state violence is analysed in terms of violations of democratic rights but not as class violence, as an expression of class domination or policies, as a part of the ongoing open or hidden class struggle in society. A certain flirtation with the notion of class may be there, but there is no recognition that state power in India is also a form of class power and that this has its relevance for any effective struggle in defence of democratic rights of the Indian people against the Indian state.

It is this classlessness of their 'theorising' which primarily accounts for the fact that even with scholars who otherwise seek radical, even revolutionary changes in society, their discourse is strong only in its idealism or liberal rhetoric, that there is such a gap between the enormity of the oppressions they describe so well and the painful pettiness, the

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fragmentary and feeble nature, of the political options that emerge from this description, that even as they speak of 'state against democracy' or 'a terrorist state' and warn other intellectuals against cooption, they themselves are quite comfortable with this state whenever the occasion arises, missing no opportunity to serve it as 'inside political advisers', pleading for the long lost 'Nehruvian consensus' or new 'social contracts' for 'nation-building', that the rhetoric of 'grassroots politics' and 'movements from below' is accompanied by yet other developmental solutions from above, offered in Planning Commissions and elsewhere. The critical intellectual, in spare times at least, gets reduced to an 'intellect worker' as Paul Baran once defined him. This is, in its own way, indeed tragic. For these scholars know better and mean well by the people. But then theory is a cruel mistress, like history. And like history, it has its tragedies too.

#### **IX**

The need then is to move away from the metaphysical mode of thought, its 'specific narrow-mindedness' as Engels called it, and try to understand the issues of terrorism, state terrorism and democratic rights in a dialectical manner so that we don't miss the wood for the trees. It is not my purpose to explore these essentially interrelated issues as they have emerged in different parts of the country. Here I can only again insist that we need to understand them in their 'whole vast interconnections' within the larger social reality of contemporary India. This will include, depending upon the particular issue, the more or less important interconnections in the areas of history, of caste, gender and ecology, religion, ideology and culture, ethnicity and nationality, and so on. But central to this understanding are the interconnections in the realm of economy and the ruling class politics spawned by it. Even a cursory look at it, ~~from below~~ will reveal that ours is an historically specific form of capitalist economy in which all the evils of a somewhat lumpen or compradore capitalist development, semi-feudalism, bureaucratisation and bloated bourgeois politics daily enter into and reinforce each other. There is unequal and uneven development, with its 'two-nations' and the ever-widening gulf between the two and an 'internal colonialism' at work in the more backward parts of the country, which together are turning all the divides and fissures of our society, such as class, caste, religion, language, region, ethnicity or nationality etc., explosive and giving rise to strong disintegrative tendencies everywhere. An over-centralised and homogenising state, which is yet a weak state, only makes for more disintegration. Old organised structures of exploitation and oppression persist and myriad new oppressions, insecurities and alienations have emerged — 'We suffer not only from the living but from the dead' also, as Marx once put it. The corrupt and criminalising mark of this socio-economic development is there on

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everything in our society — there are no jobs or ideals for the youth, nor any vision and values for the people. Ours is a society in deep social and moral crisis. We are indeed paying the 'terrible cost of not changing the existing order' — Nehru's words, uttered in an obviously more lucid Marxist moment. Unable to move forward in a revolutionary manner this society provides a continuing social-material basis for all sorts of ideologically muddled protests around genuine grievances and any number of divisive or disruptive anti-people developments.

These protests and developments, ranging from 'terrorism' to communalism, have indeed materialised, above all as the consequences of a politics dominated by the ruling classes. As practised by their different political formations in recent years, in its utterly unscrupulous internecine competition for power and ineptitude of leadership, this politics has been producing one after another intractable problems for the ruling classes and tragedies for the people. ~~A search for~~ search for interconnections will show that within the larger socio-economic context of Indian society, it is the ruling class politics at the Centre and in the States which has, in each case, created and later sustained the political problems which have become or come to be perceived as 'the terrorist problem' in different parts of the country — an entirely indigenous creation which others, imperialism and its allies, are taking full advantage of. At the other end, bankrupt and increasingly bereft of legitimacy in facing the problems of its own generation, this politics, its powerlessness making it only more repressive all the time, has created and come to sustain 'a terrorist state', making the defence of democratic rights all the more necessary and urgent, though more risky also.

To advance these general propositions is not to deny the part of the particular in the emergence of 'terrorism', state terrorism and democratic rights as crucial issues at a given time or place in one part of the country or another. A recognition of their specific context and nature is in fact of decisive importance in each case, for this is how and where state's violation of democratic rights occurs and where therefore the defence of democratic rights has to be undertaken. 'A concrete analysis of a concrete situation' is necessary, as always. But a dialectical as against a 'metaphysical' orientation in such analysis will give us a more adequate understanding of the specificities involved and make for a more effective struggle, here and now, in defence of democratic rights.

### X

I don't need to pursue this subject any further. A slightly extended comment may be found in my *Of Marxism and Indian Politics*. I shall conclude with a somewhat different last point.



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It is quite common for the critics or opponents of democratic rights organisations to question their protest against state terrorism and charge them with 'keeping silent' over terrorism of 'the terrorists'. They are constantly called upon to condemn all violence, to act in a 'responsible' manner and be at least equally condemnatory of 'terrorist violence'. The alleged silence is even interpreted and condemned as support for terrorism. This is nothing new. Civil liberties organisations the world over have regularly faced such charges, similar criticism and condemnation. This criticism or condemnation, however, is entirely misconceived. I am not here concerned to discuss the overall nature and scope of the work of democratic rights or civil liberties organisations, but it is certainly legitimate for these organisations to make the distinction between terrorism of the state and terrorism resorted to by private individuals or groups. Whereas in a law-based state like India, there exists an elaborate code, an entire ensemble of laws, procedures, institutions and enforcing agencies to deal with private violence or lawlessness, there is nothing comparable, no genuine checks or controls to take care of peaceful or violent lawlessness of the state, which is potentially, and often in actual practice, the most powerful violator of democratic rights in society. It is this absence in our system of credible institutional safeguards against the illegal acts and terrorism committed or backed by the state and its functionaries, that, more than anything else, makes the presence of democratic rights organisations necessary. These organisations locate their primary concern, the task as it were, precisely here — in the paramount need to protect people's rights against their violation by the state or with its backing in one form or another. Such being the very *raison d'être* of these organisations, to ask them to do anything else, least of all take care of private lawlessness and violence, or still worse, provide justifications for state's own violence or lawlessness is indeed misconceiving their role in our society. These organisations are not there to strike balance between two kinds of terrorism. By their very self-definition, their work lies elsewhere.

This is not to ignore or in any way underestimate the problem that private violence has come to be in our society today — its ever-growing level, scale and diversity are indeed frightening. More and more of the conflicts and tensions generated in this society, above all, by its economy and politics, are seeking to express themselves outside the constitutionally ordained institutional frameworks, including the electoral process which has witnessed a steady decline in popular participation in recent years. If there is widespread socio-political turbulence in society, there is also the widespread, not unjustified, impression that peaceful ways seldom work and issues arrest political attention only through recourse to violence. But any adequate response to the problem of this



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spreading violence in our society demands, at the very least, the recognition that while any form of violence in due course acquires a certain autonomous dimension, it always arises on and is sustained by a given socio-material basis, and that its various forms, various because of differences of causation, context and conjuncture, need to be carefully distinguished from each other before we decide and act in the matter.

There is, for example, the ordinary personal-motivated violence of different kinds in our society, a most common occurrence, for so long as we have a money-and-profit dominated economy and society all forms of crime and violence which promise to pay will continue to be committed. Any effective response to this violence, obviously, must begin by questioning this domination. Or, again, given the fact that this society is full of glaring injustices and iniquities, oppression and exploitation, it will always have its victims, frustrated and desperate men and women, ready to avenge themselves or their fellow victims, violently or otherwise. The need here is not to pass moral judgements or condemn their motives and actions, but to do whatever we possibly can to change the conditions which make such frustration and desperation, and the accompanying violence, inevitable.

Yet again, along with the normal violence, we have a great deal of specific anti-people violence in our society. There is the recurring violence among the people, on one issue or another, often generated, even actively promoted by unscrupulous politics at the top. Communal violence is an obvious example. But we need to take particular notice of a more pervasive kind of private anti-people violence, which has finally arrived. The crisis of our poor possessive-market society, its manifold conflicts, its lumpen rapacity and crumbling structures of authority, with the people desperately struggling to survive, has given rise to a great deal of private violence of the rich and powerful against the people below — landlord armies, armed gangs or vigilante groups of the dominant classes, a rich variety of mafias, all sorts of 'goon squads', often linked with the police, politicians and businessmen and always available for hire, and so on. This violence, which given its overall class character is generally ~~not~~ backed, condoned or connived at by the state, deserves to be condemned without reservation. But this private violence, or for that matter lawless violence of the state itself, may provoke counter-violence on the part of the people. The people may be compelled to resist and even retaliate. They may find it necessary to turn to violence in sheer self-defence, or in defence of their democratic right to organise and struggle peacefully. They may need to resort to violence to defend the gains of their past struggles or exercise of the rights they still have, including the right to vote, and so on. Such private violence by or in behalf of the people is well-justified; it

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certainly cannot be treated or condemned in the usual manner.

Our society has also given rise to certain specific forms of private violence, armed protests or struggles by individuals and groups, which are, despite their differences of causation, character and possible futures, generally lumped together as 'terrorism' in the country, its foremost political problem today. It is <sup>not</sup> my concern to analyse this problem beyond the general observations I have already made. But one aspect of it does ~~not~~ interest us here. We don't have to lump together the various historically specific expressions of this private violence to recognise that even as this 'terrorism' fights the Indian state, it is known to turn, to a greater or lesser degree, against the people also. And this calls for a brief comment. In any armed protest, resistance or struggle, the quality of its politics, politics commanding the gun, is of decisive importance. If the quality of this politics is poor, the gun becomes increasingly more important, it tends to itself become the politics, just as state terrorism tends to do at the other end. In other words, if an armed resistance or struggle lacks a coherent liberationist ideology and programme, the requisite revolutionary theory and practice, which may help it gain the willing support of the people and mobilise them in a popular movement, it will, sooner rather than later, seek to use force to gain this support — really <sup>the</sup> people's acquiescence or compliance through fear and terror-hardened sensibilities. The policies and actions of the 'terrorists' become increasingly self-defeating, harming the very people whose cause they otherwise claim to espouse, in taking up arms against the state. Just as at the other end, seeking to gain their acquiescence or compliance the same way, state terrorism too harms the people, alienating them from 'India' it claims to be defending for them, against the terrorists. In this situation, dependence on foreign aid, aids only the process of moral and political degeneration of the original armed resistance or struggle. The consequences are the dead-end game of killing and getting killed, a vicious circle of competitive atrocities and reprisals, intermittent internecine warfare among the various groups and a brutalisation of everyday life of the common people, all of which provides an excellent cover to all sorts of anti-social elements, any and every kind of criminal activity. May be Punjab is very much on my mind, but the argument certainly has its general relevance. Needless to add, terrorist violence against the people has no moral or political justification at all. It can only be condemned. Though, for obvious reasons, detailed knowledge and careful analysis is necessary before we pass judgement in each case. We need to know the truth and not its official version only.

In a society like ours which is structurally saturated with violence, with exploitation, oppression and inequality, there is always room for revolutionary violence. To reject such violence

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and uphold non-violence on principle has no justification, rational or moral, in the light of the historical experience of the struggles of the oppressed the world over. As the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, once put it, "to teach non-violence is to strengthen established violence, that is to say, a system of production which makes misery and war inevitable." Revolutionary violence aims at destroying this established violence and to create a new system of production and society in which 'misery and war' are no longer inevitable. It is a violence, as he put it, 'which transcends itself on the way to the human future'. Thus, for example, the problem that 'the Naxalites', as they are called, present our society is not one of private violence to be condemned, but of an exploitative and oppressive social order crying out for revolutionary change. Revolutionary violence may indeed be criticised, even rejected, but not on abstract moral grounds. The grounds have to be specific such as a negative assessment about its 'appropriateness' in a given situation, a lack of 'proportionality' between means and ends, and so on. On the basis of historical experience, it is also possible to argue against the general efficacy and appropriateness of individual or group acts of revolutionary violence. Even when deemed necessary, one needs to beware of the dangerous possibility of getting side-tracked or lost in a vicious circle of violence and counter-violence. It is thus absolutely imperative for those so involved to be constantly self-critical of their theory and practice in this regard, as elsewhere, in the interests of the revolutionary movement as a whole. It seems to me, however, that the real issue with revolutionary violence is not so much its rights or wrongs as the taking of sides in the ongoing class war between the people and their oppressors and exploiters.

Looming large over all these forms of private violence in our society is the violence that Indian state has come to represent today. The issue here is not its inherently violent nature as a state, or the violence implicit in the socio-economic structures this state normally defends, violently or otherwise. What needs to be noticed is its emergence as the single largest perpetrator of violence on the people today. Such is the explicit material expression of this violence in recent years that scholars and laymen alike have been compelled to speak of 'state terrorism' or 'the terrorist state' in contemporary India. There is the ever-growing draconian legislation and the ever-expanding apparatuses of repression and the ruthless use of both everywhere in this vast land of ours. The old, extended or new laws are there — ESMA, MISA, NSA, different Armed Forces Special Powers Acts, many kinds of Disturbances, Disturbed or Terrorist Affected Areas Acts, amendments to the Constitution and the Criminal Procedure Code, and above all the TADA and so on — which provide for new structures of authority, new hierarchy of courts, new legal procedures, new ranges of offences, new and stiffer

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penalties, new detentions without trial and new and harder powers for the police, para-military forces and the army. New restrictions have come to be imposed on the life and liberties of the people in violation of old and established constitutional safeguards and new authorisation provided for the lawlessness of the state, including extra-judicial, kidnappings and killings known as 'encounters'; and along with 'custodial deaths' even the phenomenon of 'missing', long associated with the dictatorial regimes of Latin America has arrived. To execute these laws and this lawlessness, along with the old we now have any number of new police and paramilitary formations, new security set-ups, armed wings, guards and protection groups and the rest, well-supported by the army on the one hand and the well-rewarded state or politician-sponsored terrorist groups on the other. The much touted 'financial crunch' notwithstanding, financing all this has been no problem at all. In large 'terrorist affected' parts of the country, it is a situation of massive power, without any checks or accountability, but with an irresistible temptation to confuse every expression of popular protest, dissent or even recalcitrance with terrorism and therefore meant to be handled with ruthless brutality. Unchecked power has its own logic; corruption rampant in the system has taken care of the rest. Whatever its problems or problematic success in fighting 'terrorism', state's terrorism has been remarkably successful in alienating the people and pushing them out of its own 'mainstream', leaving 'the national press' free to deceive itself and mislead the rest of 'the Indian nation'. Only the nationalistically blind will fail to see that it is this mindless violence of the state, growing ever more mindless in its failure or impotence and the accompanying loss of legitimacy, which spawns anew and fuels the terrorist violence in the country. The two in fact regularly feed, justify and legitimise each other — all the while adding to the misery and suffering of the common people everywhere.

### XII

This digression on the subject of violence in our society, which is far from being exhaustive, should be sufficient to indicate the complexity of the issues involved which critics must show awareness of when they seek condemnation of violence qua violence or make their more specific but simplistic demands on democratic rights organisations. It is simply not true that these organisations condone, approve or support private violence or terrorism against the people. Only they don't see its condemnation as their task. Nor is it that they don't take note of its excesses or violations of people's rights, or have not found it necessary at times to even publicly criticise or condemn these. They have indeed done so, not on abstract moral grounds or to oblige the critics, but for good reasons of their own which include securing greater effectiveness for the democratic rights



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movement. But by self-definition, they have not seen this as their responsibility. They are committed to use their limited resources, first and above all, to defend the democratic rights of the people against their violation by the state. Besides, if they are rather wary and seemingly non-cooperative with their critics in this matter, there is a consideration which they simply cannot afford to ignore. They are well aware that concerning state's current assault on democratic rights, we are in a situation where those who know will not speak and the vast majority of our people are simply kept ignorant about the violations, even crimes being committed by the state, often in their name and their supposed interests. Given the power and reach of the communication media, public and private, at the disposal of the state, given its extraordinary ability to project its own point of view and to manipulate public opinion by selective use of information, and given the fact that you cannot accuse the state or the 'mainstream' private media of fair or balanced reporting where democratic rights movement or for that matter any popular democratic movement is concerned, every concession made by the democratic rights organisations to their critics here is bound to be used in the time-tested one-sided manner to further condone, justify and legitimise state terrorism. This would mean, in effect, a denial of the very purpose for which these organisations have come to be constituted. Their work will lose its meaning, and so will the courage, dedication and sacrifice of their activists. Democratic rights organisations and their activists have indeed reason to be wary. They have a right to their own democratic decisions in this matter. You cannot blame them if they do not see the 'condemnation' demand<sup>ed</sup> of them as one of their concerns, an invariable responsibility they must not evade. 'Law and order' is not their business and they are not in the game to perform balancing acts, give evidence of their 'impartiality' or 'fairmindedness', or dish out even-handed judgements on violence in our society. Nor are they in search of certificates of good conduct or 'patriotism' from their critics or the powers that be. They may in fact regard it ridiculous, even shameful to jump on their band-wagon and join their chorus of righteous indignation against 'terrorism'. They refuse to join this chorus not because they love violence or have a twisted moral sense which can no longer distinguish between right and wrong, nor because they would condone actions which every decent person ought to condemn. Their work over the years in Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere should make it abundantly clear that they don't need to make any apologies for their moral sense. And they know what decent behaviour is as well as most, and certainly a lot better than their critics or the other leaders of the anti-terrorist chorus — they owe no explanation to anyone here. They don't join this chorus simply because they are in the game, if not only, certainly primarily, to defend the democratic rights of the people against their violation by the state.



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The way the critics still continue with their criticism and condemnation and even betray a strong compulsion to misrepresent the motives and intentions of democratic rights organisations even when they are known to have condemned militant groups for their 'violation of human rights' or 'senseless killings', persuades me that there is more to critic's umbrage, and one needs to look at their motives and intentions, at their game. May be what is involved here, implicitly or otherwise, are the more basic issues of ideology and politics on either side. For example, apropos 'terrorism' in Kashmir, one of India's top-ranking journalists, in a centre-page article in *Times of India*, has written of 'the utterly one-sided pronouncements of do-gooder groups', and charged them with the view that 'mass killings and kidnappings of the innocent by terrorist and secessionist gangs are perfectly alright'. This, we all know, is simply not true. No democratic rights organisation has ever subscribed to anything even remotely resembling this view. On the contrary, to give an example, with Mr. V.M. Tarkunde of Coordination Committee on Kashmir and many others, they have, context permitting, more than once criticised and condemned such actions and urged the militants to stop them. Yet the critics persist with their charges — they are simply not satisfied. Obviously what really troubles them is not the lack of such criticism or condemnation. Obviously they are after something else or more. It seems to me that what they are really asking for, of course in 'the interests of the nation', is an acceptance and endorsement of the state's own terrorism in the Valley, the politics of this terrorism, in effect, the ruling class politics in Kashmir. I see no reason at all why the democratic rights organisations or their activists should be expected to so oblige these critics, in Kashmir or for that matter anywhere else in the country.

This is not to suggest that democratic rights organisations are the vehicles of some other politics, as this term is commonly understood. If 'law and order' is not their business, 'politics' in this sense is not their business either. Racketeers abound in our country, they are everywhere. But there is no doubt that those genuinely attracted to the risky business of defence of democratic rights today are men and women of high moral sense and idealism, full of deep concern for the people. Many, if not most of them may naturally tend to sympathise with the Left of one shade or the other, they may have their interest in radical or revolutionary politics. To this they are fully entitled. But the democratic rights organisations or those of their activists who have this other interest or activity well know that even though the abuse of state power, including state's terrorism, ultimately grows out of the essential, structural compulsions of the prevalent economy and politics, other organisations, other struggles of the people, are needed for a change in this situation, and that it is going to be a long haul. They know that democratic rights organisations are not the vehicles of this other struggle. But then this other struggle is on in our

### *Terrorism, State Terrorism and Democratic Rights*

society, between the people and those who oppress and exploit them — however weak or fragmented it may be or beset with a thousand problems of theory and practice, politics and organisation. And no matter how the democratic rights organisations define or circumscribe their role, how scrupulously they stick to the self-imposed limits of their popular concerns, or how 'responsibly' they behave in pursuit of these concerns, their work yet remains a defence of people's rights and places them firmly on the people's side of the barricades, if I may put it that way. It is and cannot but be also an entry, one among many, into this other struggle, and in this sense, more than only a defence of democratic rights. Even if the democratic rights activist somehow fails to see this, his critics, generally more perceptive and class conscious in these matters, see and understand this very clearly. So do the state and its functionaries. Hence the hostility and harassment, the persistent persecution. For the ruling classes, their representatives or spokespersons, democratic rights activity is, in the final analysis, a dangerously subversive activity. It has to be questioned, criticised and condemned, and, as far as possible, suppressed.

The democratic rights organisations and their activists are, in their own way, standing by the struggling Indian people in these our troubled times, when so many others, from the intelligentsia and elsewhere have deserted them — many of them deserting their people for 'the nation'. Such an understanding should make them rightfully more proud of their struggle in defence of democratic rights and, I am sure, it will make this struggle more effective also.

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